

THEATRE

Mother Courage And Her Children

Cottesloe

Michael Billington

BY A strange chance, the two great plays about the Thirty Years War are both in the repertory of our national companies. What is even odder is that Schiller's Wallenstein at The Pit gets a production of exemplary Brechtian clarity while Brecht's Mother Courage And Her Children at the Cottesloe — directed by Anthony Clark for the National's Education Department — is often unbearably moving.

The paradox of Mother Courage is that it appeals simultaneously to head and heart. Brecht's point is that war teaches people nothing: Mother Courage, having lost her three children to a futile conflict, finally harnesses herself to her wagon to start up again in business. But while Brecht condemns her as "a battle-field vulture" — in Hanif Kureishi's lively new version — he also cannot prevent us warming to her dogged tenacity. That is precisely why Brecht was a great dramatist: his humanist sympathy was constantly at war with his political orthodoxy.

Coming at a time when former Yugoslavia is ravaged by a pitiless war, Clark's production is obviously timely; but it pushes the play almost too much towards poignant, personal tragedy. Ellie Haddington as Mother Courage has a strong, feisty, stage-enlivening presence. But in the famous scene when — out of self-protec-



Feisty . . . Ellie Haddington as Mother Courage PHOTOGRAPH: HENRIETTA BUTLER

tion — she denies recognition of her dead son, Swiss Cheese, she lets her face brim with tears and her legs momentarily buckle as she surveys the corpse: not only would this betray her instantly but it's against the spirit of the text which is about the human cost of survival. Likewise when she sticks with daughter Katrin pretending it's for the sake of the wagon, she misses the gruff common sense with which the character invariably masks emotion. If I am critical, it is only because Haddington is potentially a great Courage here prey to sentimental direction.

In other respects, Clark gets the play right. The periods merge easily so that 17th century costumes co-exist with a Courage in headscarf,

trousers and boots, and an onstage wireless set that announces the content of each scene. The eight actors also switch roles unfussily and give full weight to Sue Davies's lyrics and Mark Vibrans's music: Chris MacDonnell as a cigar-chomping general and Saira Todd as a shaven-headed whore later transformed into a balloon-hipped colonel's wife are particularly good. It's a robust production of Brecht's play rendered in vigorous contemporary argot — "Shut your face, you Finnish fart" — by Kureishi. I just feel that it over-emphasises empathy with the heroine at the expense of criticism of her petty-bourgeois capitalism.

In rep at the Cottesloe (071-928-2252).

Billington On Mother Courage

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